

THE OBSTACLES FACED BY THE JUNIOR LECTURERS OF SYIAH KUALA UNIVERSITY IN ACHIEVING THE REQUIRED TOEFL SCORES

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the obstacles faced by the junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University in achieving the required TOEFL scores. This qualitative research utilized the focused description method for data collection. The sample of this research was 23 junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University who were participating in a language training class at the Language Centre of Syiah Kuala University and are in preparation for further study in either home country or overseas universities. The instrument of data collection is the google form questionnaire. The data were analyzed using the percentage formula. The result shows that junior lecturers have difficulty in answering the listening questions with long conversation (93.3%) and avoiding similar sounds (80%). In the structure and written expression section, the obstacles usually come in answering coordinate connectors, agreement after certain words, and parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions questions (60%). Other obstacles evolved from the agreement after prepositional phrases questions (67.7%). Meanwhile, in reading comprehension, recognizing main ideas and determining the meanings of difficult words questions were two main obstacles for the junior lecturer (67.7%).

Keywords: Obstacles, junior lecturers, the required TOEFL scores

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INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test used to evaluate a non-native English speaker's proficiency in the English language. It is a standardized test to measure the English language ability (Half, Duran, & Stansfield, 1984) and aptitude (Heffernan, 2006, p. 1) of foreign students who apply for higher education where English is an instructional-medium language. For the junior lecturers who are accepted to work as a lecturer at Syiah Kuala University, a certain minimum TOEFL score is expected of them before they apply for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Some of their scores are less than 500 whereas the TOEFL score needed for PhD is 550-600, depending on which university they apply to. To answer the challenge, the Language Centre of Syiah Kuala University has conducted a language training course to teach the junior lecturers so that they will acquire a certain TOEFL score.

Based on the preliminary study on July 6th, 2019, through observation at the TOEFL training class of Syiah Kuala Language Centre and discussion with the staff on 23 junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University, the researcher found that based on the pre-test and post-test, only one of them acquired 373, while the rest lay about 460 to 497. If the average score is 450, it will not meet the above requirement. Henceforth, this is the reason the junior lecturers attend the TOEFL training class.

The difference in research subject, methodology, the focused-obstacles, respondent, and specific skills of the TOEFL test reveals the gap between this study and others. This study focuses on the obstacles faced by the junior lecturers at Syiah Kuala University in achieving the required TOEFL scores. The writers believed that by mapping out the obstacles faced by the junior lecturers in the TOEFL test, it can help them achieve the required TOEFL scores.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TOEFL test

Norris (2018) stated that the TOEFL test was developed in the early 1960s to assess the English proficiency of second language speakers who intend to study at institutions where English is the language of instruction. The TOEFL test was commissioned under the auspices of the Testing of English as a Foreign Language, a temporary

working group formed through the cooperative effort of more than thirty public and private institutions concerned with the English proficiency of second language speakers, especially those applying to English-medium academic institutions.

The TOEFL test consists of three sections, namely listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. Section 1. Listening Comprehension, consists of 50 questions; Section 2. Structure and Written Expression, consists of 40 questions; and Section 3. Reading Comprehension, consists of 50 questions. Listening comprehension examines test-takers' ability to understand spoken English and conversation about some topics, whereas structure and written expression measures test-takers' ability and knowledge of the English system, and reading comprehension tests test-takers' ability to read and answer questions at an academic level. These three sections are further elaborated in the following paragraphs.

Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is an active process of constructing meaning by applying knowledge to the incoming sound (Buck, 2011). Furthermore, he states that one of characteristics of spoken text is phonological modification. Roach (2001) explains that the degree of phonological modification varies depending on the situation. For example, in formal situations speakers tend to have less modification than in informal situations. Similarly, when the information is important, they tend to pronounce the words with more care than they would with casual, throw-away information. It changes to assimilation, elision and intrusion. Furthermore, Yagang (1994) listed four sources attributed to the obstacles of listening comprehension; message, listener, speaker and physical setting.

Structure and Written Expression

Thomson and Martinet (1970, p.15) state that this skill demonstrates the ability to recognize grammatically correct English and the test-taker must choose the correct way to find errors in sentences and then complete them. Understanding the articles, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, interrogatives, possessives, personal and reflective pronouns, relative pronouns and clauses, prepositions, verbs, auxiliary verbs and tenses is the absolute way to pass this part of the skill test.

Grammar or structure is a component that should be mastered in the TOEFL test. The term has several meanings and there is no

universally accepted definition. Different experts define the term differently. Harmer (2001, p. 12) defined grammar as the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in the language. Gerot and Wignell (1994) stated that grammar is the study of word-classes, its inflections, functions, and relations in the sentence of a language.

Grammar is learned to understand how words are properly formed in sentences, when the grammatically correct pattern is used, and how the sentence will be correctly explained. Langacker (1987) mentioned that some way, the meaning of the sentence is determined by the meanings of the words from which it is constructed. Words, however, are the building blocks of language. Until we build the words up into meaningful groups and construct a meaningful connection between one group of words and another, we cannot use language efficiently.

Therefore, Burton (1984, p. 2) declared that “using language is not just a matter of knowing words and knowing which words to use”. Our ability to make ourselves understand in any language, whether it is our native language or a foreign language, depends on two things: First, we have to know the words that will express whatever it is we are trying to express. Second, we have to know how words behave in the particular language we are trying to use”. Fromkin and Rodman (1998, p. 14) agreed by saying that “the sounds and sound patterns, the basic units of meaning, such as words, and the rules to combine them to form new sentences constitute the grammar of a language. Grammar, then, is what we know; it represents our linguistics competence. To understand the nature of language, we must understand the pattern”.

Similarly, Sharpe (2005) said that grammar in the TOEFL test is a standard writing form to recognize standard written English. To answer the question in this section correctly, the junior lecturers have to master all parts of English structure that often occur in the test, such as subject-verb agreement, clause, auxiliary, word choice, etc.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the act of combining information in a passage with prior knowledge in order to construct meaning. Khoiriyah (2010) stated that reading comprehension can be defined as a thinking process through which readers become aware of an idea, understand it in terms of their experiential background, and interpret it in relation to their own needs and purposes.

Kucan and Beck (2012) mentioned that reading comprehension is not in concern of the composed language, yet it is a procedure that includes the combination of decoding ability, vocabulary knowledge, background information, and employing pertinent information to comprehend the content of a text. This explanation specifically regards the comprehension part of reading comprehension with text media. In this study, the specific text is the TOEFL test.

Therefore, Murcia (1991) stated that reading has become one of the primary curricular concerns in the second and foreign language programs. It is one of the main goals of learners in universities where English is taught as a foreign language. For that reason, reading skill is important to be mastered by the junior lecturers who take the TOEFL test.

According to Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996), reading is one of the important factors in improving junior lecturers' general language skill in English. It can help them improve their writing and learn to think in English as well. Furthermore, it will increase their English vocabulary. Additionally, it is a good way to practice English for those that live in a non-English speaking country. One will never improve and establish a good reading habit of English materials if they do not read a lot. However, they prefer reading material that was written in Bahasa because reading the English material is difficult.

The obstacles in TOEFL tests

In the Oxford Dictionary of English, the term obstacle refers to matters that block one's way or prevents or hinders progress. This study examines the obstacles faced by junior lecturers in each skill and their efforts to overcome them. Knowing the obstacles in each skill will help them find the right strategy to solve it. A detailed review on the obstacles of each skill is part of the strategies that can help junior lecturers overcome the problem.

The Required TOEFL Scores

The TOEFL score is based on the number of questions that the test-takers answer correctly. There are two types of TOEFL score; computer-based TOEFL test score scale and paper-based TOEFL test score scale. According to Educational Testing Service (2000-2001 edition) regarding the scoring scale of the paper-based test, it has been truncated at the lower end to prevent overlapping and to further

differentiate between the scales for the two tests. These differences will immediately identify which type of test the examinee has taken.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Participants

The data was acquired by interviewing and asking all 23 participants of junior lecturers to complete the google-form questionnaire online. Additionally, the mentors were interviewed for additional information about how the participants overcome their obstacles. The interview codes include TL for the trainer of listening, TS for trainer of structure and written expression, and TR for trainer of reading comprehension

Research Instrument

The data were taken from the result of the junior lecturers' TOEFL pre-test and post-test scores along with their responses to the questionnaire. The instruments are described below:

Pre-test and post-test

The pre-test score was treated as the baseline data to measure their ability in Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Experiences, and Reading Comprehension skills. The pre-test in this research refers to the untargeted-result score test taken before the language training class conducted by The Language Centre of Syiah Kuala University. Subsequent to the treatment at the training class, the junior lecturers took the TOEFL pre-test to measure their latest TOEFL score.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire follows Dornyei and Taguchi's (2009) Likert-scale version of two options responses: "yes" and "no". The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions for listening comprehension skill, 13 questions for structure skill, and 15 questions for reading comprehension skill.

Interview guide

Both participants and the 3 mentors of each section of the TOEFL skills were interviewed for additional information regarding the obstacles faced by the junior lecturers in three TOEFL sections as well

as their strategies that help them increase their score. There are 11 questions on listening comprehension, 14 questions on structure and written expression, and 15 questions on reading comprehension. Furthermore, the researcher also asked for additional information about what kind of motivation given by the trainers to improve the junior lecturers' skills and how they adapt to it.

Technique of Data Collection

The data were collected through questionnaire, documentation and interview. The questionnaire was distributed to all 23 junior lecturers aimed to find out their techniques of increasing their TOEFL scores. In addition, both the junior lecturers and the mentors were interviewed in order to understand their solution to the problem.

Technique of Data Analysis

All data were analyzed based on the result of the questionnaire, interview, the pre-test score, and the post-test score. The questionnaire interview was analyzed using the percentage formula according to the indicators formulated in the first and the second research questions. Both the pre-test and the post-test were analyzed according to the TOEFL assessment criteria of the range standard issued by ETS (2015a; 2015b). The increase in TOEFL scores was analyzed by comparing the pre-test and the post-test scores.

The analysis of questionnaire

The data from the questionnaire were analyzed based on the percentage analysis formula proposed by Sudjono (2007).

$$\frac{\sum d}{\sum Q}$$

$$= \frac{\sum d}{\sum Q} \times 100\% = D\%$$

$$\sum Q$$

The analysis of interview

In this research, the informants are the junior lecturers and mentors who teach them at the Language Centre's training class. The result of the interview from the junior lecturers was used to find out their obstacles in the TOEFL test while the result of the trainers' interview was to verify the strategies they used.

The analysis of document

The researcher analyzed the pre-test and post-test document to find out the result of TOEFL score for each 23 junior lecturers and how the TOEFL training class helped them increase the score.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**Listening Comprehension**

There are eight obstacles faced by the junior lecturers; the highest percentage (93.3%) relates to the attentional focus skill on the long conversation. On the contrary, they do not have problems with short conversation, with a percentage of 33% only.

They did have problems in avoiding similar sounds (80%). Other obstacles related to listening skills in almost negative expressions and negative with comparative, owing the percentage of 66.7% for each. They found it difficult to deal with passive voice of *who* and *what*, multiple nouns, and double negative expressions, accumulating 53.3% respectively.

Table 1. The percentage of the junior lecturers' obstacles in Listening Comprehension

<i>No</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>The percentage of obstacles per problem</i>
1	Skill in focusing attention on the short conversation in the test	33%
2	Skill in focusing attention on the long conversation in the test	93.3%
3	Skill in identifying synonyms	46.7%
4	Skill in avoiding similar sound	80%
5	Skill in drawing conclusions about <i>who</i> , <i>what</i> and <i>where</i> in listening test	60%
6	Skill in listening to <i>who</i> and <i>what</i> in passive	53.3%
7	Skill in listening to <i>who</i> and <i>what</i> with multiple nouns	53.3%
8	Skill in listening to negative expressions	46.7%

9	Skill in listening to double negative expressions	53.3%
10	Skill in listening to almost negative expressions	66.7%
11	Skill in listening to negative with comparative	66.7%

Structure and Written Expression

Some of the obstacles in structure and written expression concern with the skills of present participle (53.3%), coordinate connectors (60%), agreement of certain words (60%), and agreement after prepositional phrase (67.7%).

Table 2. The percentage of the obstacles in Structure and Written Expression.

<i>No</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>The percentage of obstacles per problem</i>
1	Skill in finding present participles.	53.3%
2	Skill in coordinate connectors.	60%
3	Skill in agreement after prepositional phrases.	67.7%
4	Skill in adverb clause connectors.	53.3%
5	Skill in agreement after expressions of quantity.	46.7%
6	Skill in agreement after certain words.	60%
7	Skill in parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions.	60%
8	Skill in parallel structure with paired conjunctions.	53.3%
9	Skill in adjectives and adverbs.	40%
10	Skill in adjectives after linking verbs.	53.3%

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension section consists of five reading passages, each followed by a number of reading comprehension and vocabulary questions. Topics of the reading passages are varied, but they are often informational subjects that might be studied in an American University, such as American history, literature, art, architecture,

geology, geography, and astronomy. Based on the table above, the researcher presents the percentage of the junior lecturers' obstacles in the table below.

Table 3. The percentage of the obstacles in Reading Comprehension

<i>No</i>	<i>Problem</i>	<i>The percentage of obstacles per problem</i>
1	Skill in finding main idea.	33.3%
2	Skill in understanding main idea questions.	33.3%
3	Skill in recognizing the organization of ideas.	67.7%
4	Skill in answering stated detail questions.	40%
5	Skill in finding unstated detail questions.	40%
6	Skill in finding pronoun referents.	40%
7	Skill in answering implied detail questions	46.7%
8	Skill in answering transition questions.	46.7%
9	Skill in finding definitions from structural clues.	46.7%
10	Skill in determining meaning from word parts?	53.3%
11	Skill in using context clues to determine meanings of difficult words	67.7%
12	Skill in using context to determine meanings of simple words	40%
13	Skill in determining where specific information is found.	46.7%
14	Skill in determining the tone and purpose	60%

Based on the percentage of the obstacles in Table 3, the junior lecturers faced difficulty mainly in four skills; recognizing the organization of ideas, determining meaning from word parts, using

context clues to determine meanings of difficult words, and determining the tone and purpose.

Table 4. Pre-test and post-test result of each section

No	Sam ple	Pre-test			Total				Total
		LIST	RDG	STR		LIST	RDG	STR	
1	L-1	47	56	40	477	45	34	48	423
2	L-2	52	42	55	497	52	56	54	540
3	L-3	48	47	42	457				
4	L-4	46	49	47	473	47	46	45	460
5	L-5	49	49	46	480				
6	L-6	52	43	54	497	47	56	60	543
7	L-7	47	44	48	463	52	45	46	477
8	L-8	52	42	50	480	40	53	43	453
9	L-9	51	42	47	467	51	48	44	477
10	L-10					43	37	36	387
11	L-11	44	52	49	483	48	53	50	503
12	L-12	50	50	46	487	49	48	46	477
13	L-13	49	46	43	460				
14	L-14	52	45	44	470	49	47	47	477
15	L-15	52	51	43	487	53	50	49	507
16	L-16	50	46	43	463	52	43	41	453
17	L-17	48	44	51	477				
18	L-18	45	54	48	490	49	53	51	510
19	L-19								
20	L-20	52	49	41	473				
21	L-21	47	48	44	463				
22	L-22	47	52	48	490	52	50	50	517
23	L-23	32	38	42	373	45	43	37	417

Based on Table 3, it was found that the scores of most of the junior lecturers increased after treatment. The deviant score of nine lecturers increased over to 20 while only four of them decreased. The increased score was in reading skill and structure skill. There are two points that the researcher would like to discuss. The first one relates to the first research questions concerning the TOEFL's obstacles faced by junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University in achieving required scores.

The second one is about the next research question on efforts made by the junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University to overcome the obstacles in achieving required scores. Based on Phillips' theory (2001) in *Longman complete course for the TOEFL test*, there are some skills that are found in three sections of the TOEFL test. The researcher classified them into three categories, obstacles in the listening comprehension section, the obstacles in structure and written expression, and the obstacles in reading comprehension. The result can be seen in Table 1. There are eight obstacles faced by the junior lecturers in this section; the highest percentage occurred in skill of focusing attention on the long conversation in the test (93.3%). On the contrary, they do not have problems with short conversation (33%).

They also faced difficulty in avoiding similar sounds (80%). Other obstacles were related to the skill in listening for almost negative expressions and listening for negative with comparative, scoring 66.7% for each skill. They also shared similar percentages (53.3%) in listening for who and what in passive, listening for who and what with multiple nouns, and listening for double negative expressions. Those who implemented the suggestion from the mentor were able to overcome the obstacles in the listening comprehension section. Listening to English music and watching English movies without subtitles help them feel familiar with the pronunciation and sounds from the English speaker.

Furthermore, Table 2 illustrates the obstacles faced by junior lecturers in the structure and written expression section. They have difficulty in dealing with finding present participle, coordinate connectors, agreement of certain words and agreement after prepositional phrase, agreement after certain words, parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions, parallel structure with paired conjunctions, and adjectives after linking verbs. The average percentages of these skills are 53.3% - 67.7%. The result of this research was in line with the previous research of Ananda (2014) who conducted the research about the obstacles that are usually faced by the test-takers in section two of ITP TOEFL. The obstacles were mostly about finding an error in a sentence that was harder than completing a sentence from a multiple choice. The junior lecturers who utilized the mentors' suggestion to practice more on each skill managed to get the required scores.

Table 3 provides a linkage about the obstacles faced by junior lecturers in the reading comprehension section. They faced obstacles in four skills; they are in recognizing the organization of ideas, in determining meaning from word parts, in using context clues to

determine meanings of difficult words, and in determining the tone and purpose. The finding was in line with Fahim and Alemi's (2010) report about the relationship between test takers' critical thinking ability and their performances on the reading section of TOEFL.

Therefore, all junior lecturers who took part in the TOEFL training class at the Language Center of Syiah Kuala University were able to overcome their obstacles in each section of the TOEFL test. According to the interview with three mentors, there are solutions to overcome the problem in each section. First, regarding the listening comprehension section, the junior lecturer learned that there are several factors that hinder test-takers in understanding long conversations; such as the dialect, pronunciation, and intonation. The solution suggested by the mentor is by watching films in English without subtitles, such as kids movies because the dialogue is neutral and easy to follow, it trains listening and increases vocabulary. Another solution is by listening to English songs. It helps listeners to be familiar with dialects and pronunciations. These habits can improve your listening skill. Moreover, the module from the treatment class stated that one of the solutions in listening to long conversations is to focus on the second line of the conversation since it may contain the answer of the question. Secondly, they should choose the restatement of words or ideas whether they understand the complete conversation or not. Next, choose an answer that is different from what they heard. It helps, especially when they do not understand the information of the second line in the conversation. Fourth, keep in mind that certain structures and expressions are tested regularly in listening such as structures (passive, wishes, conditions), functional expressions (agreement, uncertainty, suggestions, surprise), and idiomatic expressions (two-part verbs, three-part verbs, idioms). To avoid the similar sound, they can try to identify the key words in the second line of the conversation and the words in the options given. These strategies are in line with what was mentioned by Buck (2011)..

To overcome the obstacles in the structure and written expression section, the junior lecturers adopted the mentors' suggestion to practice more with the full-length free test for each section so as to familiarize them with the questions. The mentors emphasize on finding more books that provide a full test package complete with the answers. Furthermore, pay more attention to the practice than the theory. They can also use the reliable TOEFL test website. This is in line with the Successful strategies: Test-taking strategies for the TOEFL by Heffernan (2006).

In reading comprehension, the junior lecturers applied the mentors' suggestions in overcoming the obstacles in finding main ideas. The main idea can be found by studying the topic sentence, which is most probably found at the beginning of the paragraph. Furthermore, the answer to a stated question is generally given in order in the passage, and the correct answer is often a restatement of what was given in the passage. It means that the correct answer often expresses the same idea as what is written in the passage, but the words are different. These strategies are in line with Hale's (1988) opinion in the *Student Major Field and Text Content: Interactive Effects on Reading Comprehension in the Test of English as a Foreign Language*.

Additionally, based on the pre-test and post-test result of each section, it was found that most of the junior lecturers managed to significantly increase their scores after the treatment. The deviant score of nine lecturers increased over to 20 while only four of them decreased. The increased scores are in the reading skill and structure skill.

Based on Table 4 it can be concluded that the junior lecturers have difficulty in answering listening to long conversations skill (93.3%) and avoiding similar sounds (80%). The obstacles that commonly faced in the structure and written expression section were the skill in answering coordinate connectors, agreement after certain words, and parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions questions. Each of these skills shared a similar percentage index (60%). Other obstacles were mainly regarding the skill in answering agreement after prepositional phrases (67.7%). The last obstacles occurred when they have to find the main ideas of a passage (67.7%) and to determine meanings of difficult words questions (67.7%). To overcome these problems, it was suggested that the junior lecturers should improve their English proficiency before they take the TOEFL test.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The purpose of this research is to find out the obstacles faced by the junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University in achieving the required TOEFL scores and to identify their efforts to overcome these obstacles to achieve the required TOEFL scores. After analyzing the data from the questionnaire, interview, pre-test and post-test, the researcher concluded that in general the junior lecturers of Syiah Kuala University indeed faced some obstacles in each section of the TOEFL test. Additionally,

they did practice some strategies to find out the perfect solution to overcome these problems in order to achieve the required TOEFL scores.

There are some major obstacles faced by new lecturers in the three section of the TOEFL test. On the first note, their obstacles in the listening comprehension section were mainly in answering long conversation questions and avoiding similar sounds. The solutions they came out with was listening to English song and watching the English movie to familiarize themselves with the pronunciation, similar sound and dialect. They will repeatedly use this strategy combined with daily practice using the TOEFL test book and online TOEFL test to tackle their obstacles in the structure and written expression section. Additionally, they also make use of the dictionary when reading English magazines, English newspapers, and the module as the media of support to assist them for the reading comprehension section. The dictionary helps in finding out and understanding the meaning of the passage. Reading newspapers and magazines helps them to be familiar with the context of the reading text since the text generally talks about general topics such as astronomy, biology and history. Finally, their efforts on learning by themselves and attending the TOEFL training class gave them an idea about their own obstacles. As a result they will be able to pick and create an appropriate solution for every obstacle in each section of the TOEFL test.

The researcher would like to suggest two things: 1) the junior lecturers have to map out their obstacles in each of the three skills and make an effort to solve them. There are some materials that can be used, such as English songs and movies, online TOEFL test, TOEFL test book, English magazine and newspaper. 2) The mentors at the Language Centre of Syiah Kuala University also have to map out the specific obstacles the junior lecturers faced. Subsequently, put them in a class that caters the need of the specific skills and find the perfect solution to tackle the problem.

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